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The Soviet Political-Military Command Structure: Brief History and Analysis

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October 1977

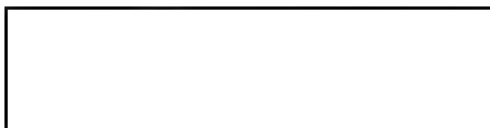
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The Soviet Political-Military Command Structure: Brief History and Analysis

*Central Intelligence Agency
Directorate of Intelligence*

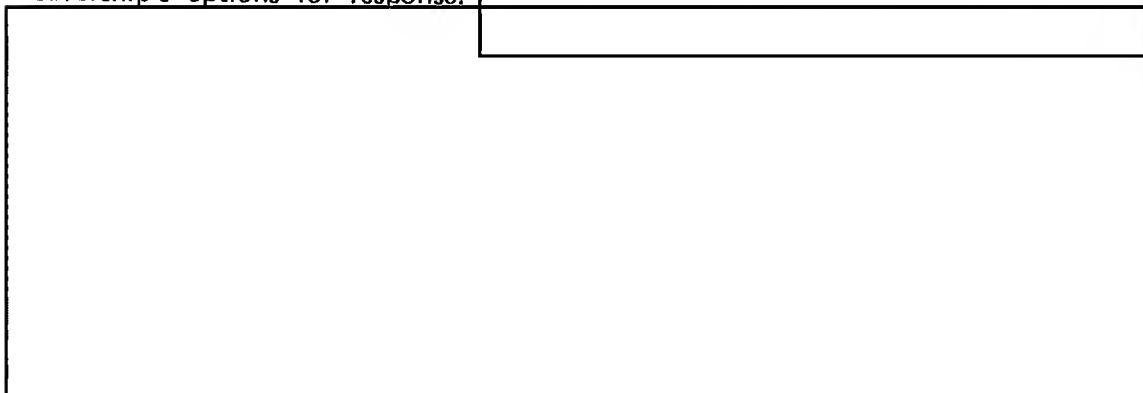
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Key Judgments

This report examines the evolution of political-military organizations concerned with command of the Soviet armed forces and analyzes key developments since 1965. This analysis has led to a number of tentative conclusions.

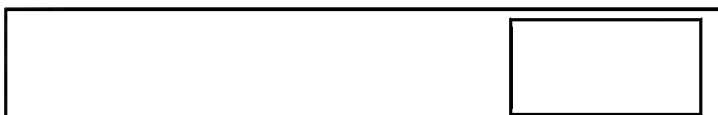
- A Supreme High Command exists in some form in peacetime, but apparently without the active participation of the top political leadership. The military continues to argue, however, that such participation is essential if the command is to perform adequately in a crisis.

- The peacetime Supreme High Command probably is an effective mechanism for the execution of military aspects of policy decisions in a crisis short of general war. If the USSR were to come under surprise attack, however, the lack of unity between political and military strategic leadership would severely restrict the leadership's options for response.



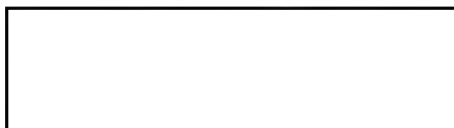
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● The issue of nuclear release authority—the power to decide to use nuclear weapons—appears to have been at the heart of the military writers' concern for the adequacy of national command structures. Their treatment of the issue and other information lead to several conclusions.

—The Supreme High Command, at least in peacetime, does not have nuclear release authority.

—The decision to use nuclear weapons is the exclusive prerogative of the political leadership.

—No one political leader can authorize the use of nuclear weapons.

—The decision to use nuclear weapons is a collegial process



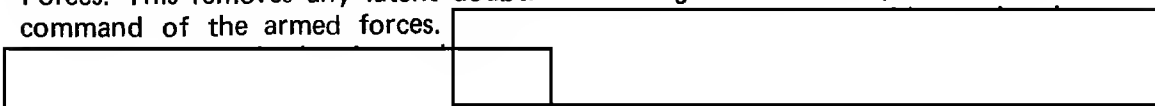
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● Recent developments in the top political leadership—most notably Podgornyy's removal from the Politburo and Brezhnev's accession to the Presidency—provide no apparent basis for modifying these conclusions. Indeed, while Brezhnev's hold on the leadership is firm at present, his uncertain health and the possibility of two or more successions to the topmost position in the next few years make it likely that the leadership will be even more collegial than in the recent past.

* * * *

In a Soviet press item which has become available since this paper was printed, Brezhnev has been identified as Supreme Commander in Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces. This removes any latent doubts concerning his formal responsibilities for command of the armed forces.



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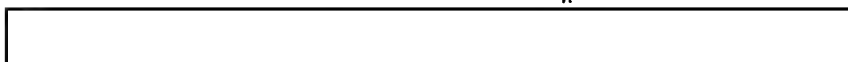
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In spite of his chairmanship of the Defense Council, his promotion to Marshal of the Soviet Union, and now the public acknowledgement of his role as Supreme Commander, Brezhnev appears to take no part in routine matters concerning the armed forces. He is not known to have participated in a military exercise, with one possible exception in 1970, and the limited evidence we have suggests that he exercises his authority over the armed forces within the Defense Council forum and through Defense Minister Ustinov. As long as this arrangement remains in effect, Brezhnev's additional title will probably do little to assuage the concerns of those in the military who want a closer relationship between Brezhnev and the military command. His formal designation as Supreme Commander in Chief will, however, make it easier to use that command system in crises or to place it on a wartime footing.



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Summary and Conclusions

Since 1917 the USSR has sought a resolution for the apparent contradictions between the collegial leadership imposed by the Communist political system and the requirement for one-man command basic to any military organization. In the process of resolving those contradictions the Soviets developed special organs of leadership. The national-level political-military decisionmaking and command organs which exist today had their roots in the postrevolutionary period when distinct organizations were established, each exercising a specific authority. These organs were created:

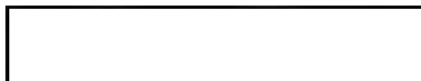
- to ensure the integration of military factors with the overall economic and political requirements of the country (a *defense political authority*),
- to provide command direction and strategic leadership to the armed forces (a *supreme military authority*),
- to perform essential tasks of military planning and control of military operations (a *military control authority*).

Additionally, one man--Lenin--exercised personal control over military affairs (a *supreme command authority*), sometimes bypassing other authorities set up for that purpose. These organizations--or authorities--under a variety of different names and organizational structures, have existed in a continuum from Lenin's day to Brezhnev's.

The development of these authorities reached its zenith during World War II. Stalin's simultaneous position as head of the party, chairman of the special

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organs of political and military strategic leadership, and supreme commander of the armed forces ensured the extreme centralization of the leadership of the country. The advantages of that centralization were to be a central theme of military authors in the mid-sixties, when they sought more effective national command structures in an era when the advent of nuclear weapons and strategic missiles both raised the potential for catastrophe and placed enormous demands on national command systems.

The national command relationships established by Khrushchev apparently were satisfactory to military leaders. They could look directly to Khrushchev, who had become the Supreme Commander in Chief, as the source of authority in an emergency situation. Khrushchev's removal in 1964, however, upset this relationship between the political leadership and the military command structure. Brezhnev either would not or could not assume the role of Supreme Commander in Chief in peacetime. Moreover, the locus of decision-making on defense matters shifted away from the Supreme Military Council--which, under Khrushchev, had been heavily weighted with military members--to the Defense Council, which was essentially a subcommittee of the Politburo. The Supreme Military Council was either abolished or became dormant, and the military's only representative on the Defense Council was the Defense Minister.

The military's concern for the adequacy of national command structures surfaced within months of Khrushchev's removal but the issues apparently had not been resolved when Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of June 1967 caused a minor crisis in the Soviet leadership. Although Brezhnev survived a challenge to his leadership, the situation apparently was the catalyst for changes in the national command structure.



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